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Advertising

Brand safety, suitability, and responsible media: A guide for digital advertisers

Safeguard every impression with these three principles

91% of consumers believe it's important for advertisers to ensure that their ads aren't placed next to content that is "dangerous, offensive, or inappropriate."[1]

In digital advertising, opportunity and risk go hand in hand

For advertisers, the complex, constantly evolving digital marketplace makes it possible to reach diverse audiences at scale and unlock fresh revenue opportunities. However, all impressions are not created equal; reaching a relevant prospect in an unsavory environment can do more harm than good, alienating potential customers and lessening advertising ROI. According to Forrester, gaining access to brand safe environments is a top priority for 81% of advertising and analytics executives surveyed by the research firm.[2]

Meanwhile, consumers are hungry for varied, dynamic content. And they're not particularly picky where they get it from. A recent survey found that, for the average media outlet, only 3.8% of consumers are considered "loyal."[3] In a fiercely competitive environment, producing timely, relevant, interesting content is critical to hold audiences' attention—and by extension, secure ad dollars. But, as programmatic buyers grow increasingly wary of complex, opaque inventory, some content that draws audiences in can push ad revenue away.

To capitalize on opportunities and avoid negative impact to their brands or revenues, advertisers and publishers need to understand inventory in context.

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Contextual intelligence enhances the effectiveness of brand safety, suitability, with responsible media practices, further minimizing risk to advertisers while expanding access to valuable inventory and preserving monetization for publishers. And when applied throughout the planning, pre-bid, post-bid, and measurement stages of the advertising cycle, these three principles generate compounding benefits.

On the buy side, clear visibility into inventory allows advertisers to get a complete picture of the opportunity available to them, powering insightful, secure ad investments that generate maximum returns. That same visibility makes it easier to accurately monitor ad performance and optimize as needed to meet and exceed campaign goals.

Ultimately, understanding the types of content consumers are engaging with helps brands and agencies make confident decisions efficiently, avoid press related incidents, and prove that their strategies work.

For publishers, being able to see their inventory from a buyer's perspective helps eliminate potential risks and foster a brand-safe environment that advertisers can trust. Context also reveals the true value of inventory, helping sellers differentiate their product and show that it's a safe and smart investment.

Let's explore the three principles, and how they fortify one another to build confidence in your brand safety strategy.
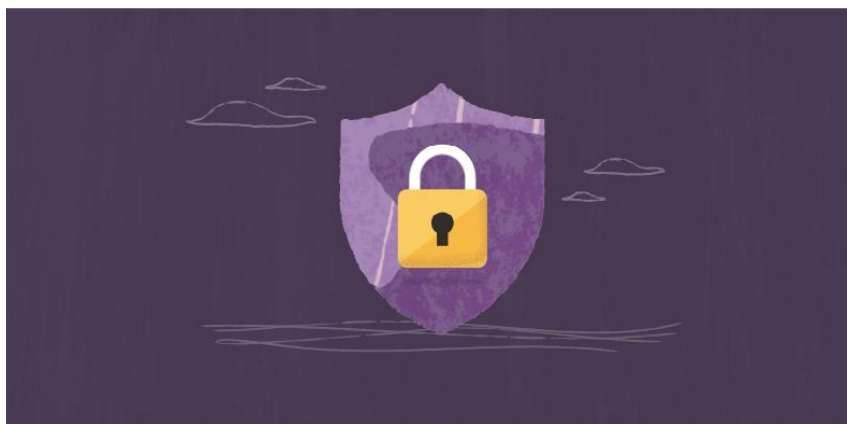
ONE

Foundational brand safety

Avoid ad environments that work against you

Brand safety strategies help prevent advertisements from appearing next to violent, illicit, suggestive, or otherwise offensive content. This is—and likely always will be—crucial in digital advertising because it proactively protects against ad environments that could do serious damage to a brand. After all, it's better to steer clear of some problems than to try and fix them after they arise.

While brand safety strategies are effective at avoiding entirely negative environments, contextual intelligence allows advertisers to avoid environments that may be negative to one brand, but appropriate for another. Brand safety and suitability initiatives need to be curated for each brand's values to ensure

Safe or suitable:
What's the difference?

Brand safety
is the practice of protecting a brand's reputation by avoiding unsafe advertising environments, often by blocking them from appearing in advertisers' bids.

Brand suitability
is the practice of bolstering a brand's reputation by aligning media with content that matches their brand values.

The game changer?

Contextual intelligence
supercharges brand safety and suitability by reading into every word within an advertising environment to understand what they all mean together. This advanced comprehension helps advertisers make confident, responsible decisions about where their messages appear and what their dollars support.

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they aren't missing out on relevant content that elevates their brand message. This is where contextual intelligence can significantly improve a brand's advertising strategy.

Consider that blocking a word like "dope"—to avoid associations with drug use—can have the unintended consequence of eliminating some content aimed at younger audiences, who use the same word to describe something that's unique or original. Similarly, many brands trying to avoid adult content block the word "gay," which contributes to a recent finding that 73% of safe stories on LGBTQ+ sites are blocked by advertisers.[4]

Advertising amid a global experience

In February 2020, the second most-blocked keyword was "coronavirus," with related terms like "COVID" not far behind.[5] This is consistent with the brand safety avoidance mindset; advertisers didn't want their messages associated with illness or tragedy. And static blocklists achieved that—and then some.

The pandemic is a global experience, relevant to every person and affecting nearly every topic of discussion. So, while blocking these words eliminated sad or frightening content from advertiser bids, it also removed opportunities that were safe, in context. The virus had a devastating impact, but coverage evolved from confusion and fear in the early days, to something much more nuanced. As people adapted to live with the effects of coronavirus, it also spawned countless stories of communities coming together, healthcare providers going above and beyond the call of duty, and businesses innovating—interesting, uplifting, and motivating stories that made audiences feel good, despite the presence of one negative word.

Beyond that, timely news stories frequently mentioned "coronavirus" simply to acknowledge the historical backdrop of an event being discussed—even those that had nothing to do with illness itself. An Oracle inventory discrepancy report found that 76% of content containing the term "coronavirus" passed safety standard for advertising—but lost out on advertiser bids due to that one word.

It goes to show how broad keyword blocking results in missed opportunities for advertisers and publishers alike—particularly in difficult times when budgets are precious and margins slim.

To continue strengthening advertising confidence, it's important to build on brand safety by applying the second principle: brand suitability.

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TWO

Brand suitability

Identify ad environments that work to your advantage

Some inventory is unsafe no matter how you look at it. But other inventory can have additive value when understood in context.

Brand suitability utilizes contextual intelligence to surface opportunities that might otherwise be missed. Analyzing content in-depth and understanding how the words relate to one another makes it possible to read into nuanced language to get a complete understanding of a placement—and then make an informed decision on whether it's brand-aligned.

But there's more to it than that. Having this depth of understanding into inventory allows advertisers to find environments that appeal to their audiences on a more personal level. For instance, reaching Gen Z consumers through fashion content can be effective. But, when you consider that Gen Z is also referred to as the "sustainability generation," and that the fashion industry is the second most polluting industry on the planet, the value of context starts to make sense.[6] Gen Z shoppers might identify more with fashion content related to sustainable consumerism, vintage clothing, or upcycling—and may be actively put off by content celebrating "fast fashion" practices with immense environmental impact. In fact, Forrester reports that 53% of U.S. adults it surveyed said they prefer to buy from brands that stay true to their own values, and 43% admit they would buy from a brand that takes a stand on shared political values when comparing products.[7]

Understanding the context of content is key to connecting with consumers, unlocking high-intent audiences, and building trust.

Now let's look at the other side of the advertising equation. Audience interests are complex and multifaceted, and publishers win and retain readers and viewers by creating unique content that aligns with those interests. Without contextual categorization, wide swaths of interests—and by extension, audiences—remain underserved by publishers. Being able to represent and categorize inventory according to its specific, nuanced context gives publishers

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the opportunity to build trust with advertisers and differentiate themselves, while still serving their audiences.

Brand suitability and brand safety strengthen one another, helping advertisers avoid negative environments and proactively identify positive ones. But they work best when you layer on the third principle of advertising confidence: responsible media.

THREE

Responsible media

Support ad environments that don't betray customers' trust

The digital marketplace is home to nearly limitless content that educates, entertains, informs, and otherwise enriches people. But some content can also be harmful in context, misleading people and taking away their ability to make informed decisions.

Businesses that fund and support disinformation and harmful content do a disservice to their audiences and risk damage to their brands. They are also risking revenue gains: a recent Forrester survey found that 60% of U.S. adults now rank brand reputation and brand values as the "Most Important" factors when making a purchase.[9] Still, it's estimated that more than a quarter billion dollars are paid to disinformation sites on behalf of well-known brands each year.[10] That's why, when utilizing a combined approach where brand safety and suitability protects brands and publishers, responsible media needs to be part of the equation to protect customers' trust in advertisers, as well.

Responsible media practices safeguard brands against harmful associations. More importantly, brands and publishers that support and maintain responsible media practices demonstrate integrity and care for their audiences by doing what they can to avoid media showing up alongside content that could cause harm. Because both brands and audiences are made up of vastly different backgrounds, it's important to take a nuanced approach that goes deeper than simple "true vs. false" or one end of the political spectrum vs. the other.

Responsible media practices disincentivize content that is:

1. **Intentionally misleading**
   Content accuracy is important, but that doesn't mean all content must be held to rigid academic standards of research and peer review. Opinion content, satire, entertainment, and other forms of expression may make claims that are untrue, in a literal interpretation of the word. But they do not necessarily represent a risk to the audience. Information that is intentionally misleading, or aims to influence thinking based on falsehoods, is harmful.

2. **Implicitly or explicitly adversarial**
   Content that attacks at-risk groups or undermines institutions that are critical to the fabric of society can directly or indirectly bring about harm. For example, microaggressive narratives that dehumanize underrepresented communities can pose just as great a danger as overt hate speech or calls for

61% of Americans believe that media isn't doing a good job of being objective, making it harder for them to trust the content they see.[8]

violence. Similarly, pseudoscience that undermines trust in a beneficial hygiene practice can have as great a negative impact as a conspiracy theory that outright refutes it.

Ultimately, responsible media ensures advertisers do not support content that can harm their brands or promote false narratives to their audiences. On the publisher side, responsible media practices enable publishers to align themselves to community, diversity, and social responsibility initiatives that are important to both their audiences and the brands that serve them. It's a long game that aims to reduce risk across the digital marketplace by eliminating funding for harmful content.

Take an integrated safety approach to advertise with confidence

Protect your brand, intrigue your customers, and minimize risk by applying safety, suitability, and responsibility at every stage.

Plan ahead

Every brand is different, and what's inappropriate for one may be beneficial to another. Analyze your offerings and your audience. Then, define a unique risk profile that specifies brand-aligned topics and contexts that represent opportunity, and those you don't want to be associated with. To ensure that your risk tolerance evolves with the times, reevaluate your profile periodically and revise as needed.

Lay the foundation for success pre-bid

Filter out inventory you know to be unsafe or irresponsible regardless of context before you bid. Then, customize your allowed inventory to include nuanced content that is contextually safe or adds unique value for your audience.

Protect your decision post-bid

Apply a second layer of defense to ensure inventory doesn't pose a threat.

Measure along the way

Analyze your efforts to understand where risk was effectively avoided, where opportunities were lost, and what—if anything—didn't meet campaign goals. Then apply those learnings to strengthen your strategy and build confidence moving forward.

Like digital advertising itself, contextual intelligence isn't something you utilize at any one stage. It's a commitment you make, and an ongoing process of deployment throughout your campaigns. But with integrated brand safety, brand suitability, and responsible media practices to support you, you can truly advertise and monetize with confidence—now and in the future.

90% of brands using a combination of Oracle Moat Analytics with Oracle Advertising Prebid Segments have reduced public relations costs and the number of public relations incidents connected to brand safety issues.[11]

About Oracle Advertising

In an increasingly competitive and fraught digital environment, Oracle Advertising is an integrated solution that operates at the pre-bid, post-bid, and measurement stages to help answer the fundamental question:

"Did my advertisements achieve the desired results?"

Oracle Contextual Intelligence

Unlock opportunities and maximize returns on digital advertising campaigns.

Learn more >

Oracle Moat

Measure media performance across campaigns.

Learn more >

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